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SUBJECT: Taiwan Population Focus 2: Foreign Brides

REF A: TAIPEI 3197

REF B: TAIPEI 3182

1.(U) Summary: Nearly a quarter of marriages in Taiwan last year involved a foreign bride. Two thirds of the women are from Mainland China, and one third from Southeast Asian and other Asian countries. The local press has stoked anxiety about the influx of foreign brides over the past decade and their ability to assimilate into Taiwan society. Of particular concern are the education level, language skills, and "non-Chineseness" of the Southeast Asian brides, which are perceived to affect the "quality" of Taiwan's population and the abilities of their children. End summary.

One Quarter of Marriages in 2004 To Foreign Brides

2.(U) In addition to low fertility (examined in ref A), the other major population trend in Taiwan is the significant number of marriages involving a foreign spouse. This trend began in the late 1980s, accelerated in the 1990s, and last year included nearly a quarter of new marriages in Taiwan. About two thirds of foreign spouses (waiji pei'ou, popularly called foreign brides in English because 98% are women) are from Mainland China, and most of the remaining third are from Southeast Asia. According to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) Department of Household Registration, between 1987 and June 2005, a total of approximately 351,000 foreign spouses entered Taiwan. 224,000 were from China, Hong Kong and Macau, and 127,000 were mostly from Southeast Asian countries. More than 87,000 of the Southeast Asian brides were from Vietnam (most are not ethnic Chinese). In 2003, 31 percent of marriages in Taiwan involved a foreign spouse. This number fell to 23 percent in 2004, due to a crackdown on sham marriages for the purposes of trafficking women for prostitution. In 2004, 13% of children born in Taiwan were born to families with a foreign-born parent. While foreign brides do not have more children than average, the effect of an influx of young women marrying men who might not otherwise have children may raise the fertility rate to some extent.

SM ISO "Fertile, Hard-Working, Taiwanese-Speaking" Wife

13. (U) Generally speaking, men who marry foreign brides are of fairly low socioeconomic status. They tend to be from rural areas in which many young women have left home to work in the cities, and they are unable to find local wives. To cater to this group of men, matchmaking agencies arrange tours for Taiwan men to China or Vietnam to meet large groups of women. Once a man meets a suitable woman, they marry quickly, either on the same trip or on a return trip several months later. A Vietnamese bride agency advertises on billboards in suburban Taipei that for a fee of US\$8500, a man can marry a "guaranteed fertile, hard-working, and Taiwanese-speaking" bride. Customers are promised, "if she runs away we will replace her with a new bride of your choosing." Advertisements for Vietnamese brides are also run on Taipei television.

Foreign Brides Seen as Social Problem to Be Solved

14. (U) The influx of foreign brides has sparked some anxiety about their effect on Taiwan society and culture. In the press, foreign brides are often described in terms of the "social problems" they cause. There is a degree of prejudice against foreign brides because they are perceived as uneducated and poor, marrying for money or to enter Taiwan for prostitution or illegal work. In early 2005, MOFA reinstated a face-to-face visa interview requirement for Vietnamese brides, citing a growing number of marriages for purposes of trafficking women for prostitution. There is also some anxiety about the roles that foreign brides play in the traditional Taiwan family. In June, Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) legislators held a press conference in which elderly women accused their foreign bride daughters-in-law of violence and death threats against them. TSU legislators even proposed inspections of all households with foreign brides. This extreme response indicates the level of discomfort within the TSU, a green political party that promotes Taiwanese identity, with the growing presence of

foreign and especially Mainland Chinese brides.

15. (U) The main social problem associated with foreign brides in the press, and in discussions with government officials, is their education level and language ability. Southeast Asian brides in particular are viewed as uneducated because they often cannot speak Mandarin fluently. Language skills are often mentioned as a concern due to their effect on foreign brides' children. Staff at the Ministry of the Interior emphasized that when mothers do not speak Mandarin well, they cannot adequately prepare their children for school, or help with their schoolwork. Additionally, Southeast Asian mothers are characterized as reluctant to talk with teachers, or to assimilate to Taiwan society. There is even anxiety that the children of foreign brides are developmentally slower than children with Taiwan-born mothers. A 2004 survey by Chiayi Christian Hospital, which was widely reported in the local press, estimated that 90% of children of foreign brides "suffer slowness in cognition and language development" "due to adults' ignorance or a language barrier." A recent Taipei Times article on Taiwan's over-15 illiteracy rate, which at 3.9% is higher than some other developed countries, argued that uneducated foreign brides are to blame, and that their illiteracy will affect their children and make Taiwan's workforce less competitive in the future.

Threat to Taiwan Identity?

16. (U) Taiwan identity is a complex issue (examined in depth in ref B). While there is some regional and linguistic diversity within Taiwan, with migrants from different areas of China and their descendants, the vast majority of the population is considered Hua ren, or culturally Chinese. In this regard, brides from Mainland China are able to assimilate to some degree, but they are still considered distinct from people who immigrated from China in 1949 or earlier. The introduction of a population of Southeast Asian brides presents a clearer challenge to Taiwan's culture: they are often neither ethnically nor culturally Chinese, and many do not speak Mandarin or Taiwanese fluently. Because of these differences, there is a degree of popular anxiety about their effect on their children. The main concerns expressed are that foreign brides' children speak Mandarin or Taiwanese at a relatively low level, and that when they enter school they will be teased by classmates and have difficulty adjusting. Because of their mixed heritage, there is also concern that they will not see themselves as Taiwan ren, or Taiwan people. For Taiwan's government, the answer is to help foreign brides assimilate to Taiwan as quickly as possible, to become what they call "new Taiwanese." Government agencies have established a range of programs to encourage brides to assimilate, including a Mandarin language and Taiwan history and culture curriculum launched by the Ministry of Education last year, a series of guidebooks published by MOI, and an MOI fund and multilingual emergency hotline.

Change to Nationality Law Targets Foreign Brides

17. (U) On June 17, the Legislative Yuan passed an amendment to the Nationality Law, which takes effect in October, that changes citizenship requirements for foreign brides. In addition to the previous requirement of five years' residence in Taiwan and proof of financial support, they will now be required to pass an exam in Mandarin language and Taiwan culture. Hsieh Ai-ling of MOI described the exam as "very basic and simple," and said that candidates had an alternative option of completing a hundred-hour course in language and culture. However, news coverage of the amendment did not mention the course option, and characterized some exam questions as difficult even for Taiwan-born residents to answer. (Note: the exam is similar to the US citizenship exam, covering topics such as the Taiwan constitution and history. End note.) Advocates for foreign spouses have protested that the new requirements are too difficult, and discriminate against foreign brides who do not have enough free time to study Chinese. MOI's Hsieh argues that the purpose of the new requirement is not to keep foreign brides from getting Taiwan citizenship, but to help them and their children better assimilate to Taiwan.

Comment

18. (U) The influx of foreign brides to Taiwan over the past twenty years is the latest chapter in a long history of immigration from China and Asia-Pacific countries. The concerns raised in the press and in government about the education level of foreign brides and their ability to speak Mandarin or Taiwanese reflect the anxieties of a relatively homogeneous society confronting an increasingly diverse population. There is also a somewhat distinct concern expressed by pro-Taiwan independence "Deep Green"

politicians and voters about brides from Mainland China. They express a fear that Mainland brides will retain a loyalty to their home in China and inculcate that feeling in their children. For both foreign and Mainland brides, the main concern seems to be not the brides themselves but their children, and what version of Taiwan identity they will embrace. End comment. (Cable prepared by AIT Econ intern Anne Bilby.)